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GLOBAL DHARMA

USA

Yoga in Public Schools?

IN SEPTEMBER, 2012, CALIFORNIA'S Encinitas Union School District introduced a yoga program as part of its elementary schools' physical education curriculum. As hoped, the yoga practices calmed the students, helped them focus and even reduced bullying. But nobody anticipated the school would land in a lengthy lawsuit.

The district is the first in the country to hire yoga teachers full time. There are twelve teachers in all, funded by a \$533,000 grant from the Jois Foundation, a nonprofit group that promotes Ashtanga Yoga. Students attend the 30-minute yoga classes twice a week.

Anticipating the program might become controversial, the district eliminated anything that might be considered religious, such as chanting of Aum. Even the Sanskrit names for the poses were changed. For example and we are not making this up padmasana, the lotus posture, became crisscross applesauce, while savasana, the corpse pose, became pancake.

The course was a hit with the kids. Eight-year-old Jacob Hagen likes it because you get to stretch out. And it's good to be the first class because it wakes you up.

Even after the practices were diluted to little more than stretching, breathing and cute names, local church groups became concerned. Several parents came forth worried that this yoga was a form of religious indoctrination and therefore unconstitutional. With the help of attorney Dean Broyles, president of the conservative advocacy group, National Center for Law and Policy, the parents sued.

The non-jury trial began in February, 2013, under San Diego Superior Court Judge John S. Meyer—who began by announcing to the courtroom that he himself practiced yoga. After some discussion, both sides agreed that this was acceptable.

Broyles argued, “There is a transparent promotion of Hindu religious beliefs and practices in the public schools through this Ashtanga Yoga program.” He called Candy Brown, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University. She testified that yoga is Hindu and that “the purpose of ashtanga yoga is to become one with Brahma.”



Butterfly pose: Young yogi effortlessly assumes badhakonasana



Brown continued by stating her belief that a conspiracy is at work to trick students into a spiritual practice. Judge Meyer challenged her: "So, these Jois-trained instructors are just the foot soldiers? You think they have been planted in the district?" She replied, "I think that is the case, yeah."

The court proceedings continued for weeks with testimonies from school district staff, school yoga teachers and others. Oddly, no actual Hindus were called to the stand.

On July 1 Judge Meyer ruled that although yoga is a religious practice, it is no longer so when stripped of all cultural references, and it may then be taught in public schools: "Yoga as it has developed in the last 20 years is rooted in American culture, not Indian culture. A reasonable student would not objectively perceive that Encinitas School District yoga advances or promotes religion." Meyer concluded that the plaintiff's case was culled from personal opinions and unreliable Internet sources. "It's almost like a trial by Wikipedia, which isn't what this court does," said Meyer.

VIETNAM

Ponagar Temple Festival

EACH YEAR, FROM APRIL 30 TO MAY 2, the little-known Hindu Cham people of Vietnam celebrate the Nha Trang Ponagar Temple Festival in honor of the Goddess Bhagavati, known in Vietnamese as Yan Po Nagar. In 1100 ce the Champa Kingdom occupied most of southern Vietnam and adjacent areas. Later the kingdom declined, and many Cham in what is now Cambodia converted to Islam. The Hindu community in Vietnam numbers just 60,000.



Welcoming the Gods: Dancers make ready for the festival's main ceremony, which includes traditional music, dancing and singing

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The Ponagar temple festival is the largest cultural event held by the Cham each year, attracting tens of thousand of tourists. Beginning with the "Lions" Dance, the celebration continues with many other dances, songs and ceremonies welcoming and honoring the Goddess. The local provincial government has recognized the festival as an "Intangible Cultural Heritage" of the nation.

WASHINGTON, DC
Saraswati Lands in Capitol



A new sight: The 16-foot-tall statue of Goddess Saraswati stands in front of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington, DC

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ANEW AND LOVELY SIGHT GREETs people walking past the many embassies and dedicated statues along Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC. In front of the Indonesian Embassy, just one block from the Indian Embassy, stands a recently created 16-foot statue of Saraswati, Goddess of art, knowledge and wisdom, gifted to the US by the Indonesian Embassy.

The idea for the statue came from Ambassador Dr. Dino Patti Djalal as a statement of the harmonious coexistence of Hinduism and Islam in that Muslim-majority nation. To create the sculpture, craftsman Nyoman Sudarwa was flown in from Bali along with six of his plaster masons. He and his team fabricated the concrete masterpiece in just three months. This is nothing new for them, as it is common in Indonesia to put Saraswati in front of universities and government buildings.

The sculpture, yet to be dedicated, includes at its base a statue of Barack Obama as a child, seen with two of his classmates while attending grade school in Indonesia. The plaque describes Saraswati: "The Goddess of knowledge and art, embodied as a beautiful woman, is a symbol that science is something beautiful and attractive."



Prize spelling: A girl receives her plaque at the prize distribution ceremony, held at the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago on June 16

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USA Dharma Bee for Vivekananda

IN RECOGNITION OF THE 120th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's speech to the Parliament of World's Religions, as well as his 150th birthday, over 3,000 children from near and far gathered in Chicago for the Dharma Bee, an international contest, which concluded on June 15. The event, comprising a speech contest, poster presentations, written tests and team projects, tested participants on their knowledge of the famous Hindu monk. The program aimed to provide an exciting education while offering youth insight into areas of community service and dharmic living.

Shreya Venkatesh (13), a contestant from Arizona, said she enjoyed the chance to learn more about Hindu culture. At the reward ceremony the head of the local

Vedanta Society said, "According to Vivekananda, dharma is a process that makes a brute into a man, and man into God."

VEGETARIANISM A Meatless Menu for Kids

YOUNG STUDENTS ACROSS the United States have long been subject to the rather unpleasant school lunch, a salty, greasy, cardboard-like array of barely edible food-like substances. These lunches typically include the lowest quality: oily pizzas, salads made purely of iceberg lettuce and, of course, the appalling mystery-meat of the day.



A healthy lunch: Student Arianna Francisco seems amused by School Chancellor Dennis Walcott's attempt to eat salad with a spoon (or is it a spork?)

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One school in Flushing, New York, has had enough. The Active Learning Elementary School, founded just five years ago on the principle that strong academic achievement is bolstered by a healthy lifestyle, is the first public school in the US to go completely vegetarian. Roasted chickpeas, black bean quesadillas, vegetarian chili and curries, real vegetables, brown rice and falafel have replaced the standard public school menu. The school became 100% vegetarian in January, 2013, meeting all the state requirements for protein while staying within budget.

The kids love it. While eating her quesadilla, nine-year-old Marian Satti, told The New York Daily News, "This is so good! I'm enjoying that it doesn't have a lot of salt in it." School Chancellor Dennis Walcott stated, "I don't eat fried foods. I don't drink soda. I try not to have sweets too often, and that's what we want for our students; to make sure they eat healthy both at home and school."

INDIA

Kedarnath: Years to Restore

THE DISASTER STRUCK IN MID-JUNE. It began with a cloudburst above Charbari Lake in the mountains above Kedarnath. When the heavy monsoon rain clouds get trapped in the high elevations of the Himalayas, they can literally burst, dropping enormous quantities of water in a short time on a small area. This time the large Himalayan lake ruptured its banks, releasing a two-story-high flood of ice, boulders, mud and water into the Mandikini River, a major tributary of the Ganga.

The flood engulfed Kedarnath town and temple on its banks. At 11,755 feet, Kedarnath is the highest and most remote of the four Char Dham sites in this area of the Himalayas. These sites are visited by hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims at this time of year.



The enduring temple: Kedarnath temple stands alone, intact and silent among the washed-out streets, scattered debris and ruined homes

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Eyewitnesses said huge rocks broke away from Kedar Dome, the third largest peak above the town. Some of the giant boulders stopped just before the Kedarnath shrine, diverting the flood around the temple and leaving it largely intact. Many adjacent buildings were damaged or destroyed, and thousands of residents and pilgrims drowned.

One rescued pilgrim, -Sitaram Sukhatiahe, told the Press Trust of India, "It was shocking to watch a place bustling with people metamorphose in a matter of a few hours into an island of death and destruction."

Following the destruction, the temple's Bhog Murti (a Deity which can be moved) was taken from the shrine by Vageshling, a young temple priest who had survived the flooding. Traveling 61 kilometers, mostly on foot, he delivered the Deity to the temple in Ukhimath where the Deity normally resides during the winter months.

After devastating Kedarnath, the surging water flooded village after village as it coursed downward. Roads and bridges were washed out at thousands of points. Bodies washed up as far away as Haridwar. Birendra Singh, a former army officer, told the press, "There were 67 houses in our Chandrapuri village, out of which 63 were washed away by the Mandikini River. Not a single official has visited our village as yet. We have nothing to go back to."

Indian military and paramilitary forces were called in from across the nation to search for survivors, transport food and supplies and rescue stranded people. State governments as well as NGOs jumped in to help.

But before serious efforts were started to help the local population, the relief effort focused on finding and evacuating the hundreds of thousands of far-from-home pilgrims.

Early estimates stated that 300,000 people have been affected by the cataclysm and over 100,000 have been evacuated. Roughly 10,000 people were injured, and 11,000 thought to be missing. An estimated 5,500 have died, though the actual number could be higher. Infrastructure repair and rebuilding will take years.

BRIEFLY...

ACCORDING TO A STUDY

published in JAMA Internal Medicine, a Journal of the American Medical Association, vegetarians live longer than meat-eaters. The study tracked 73,308 people for nearly six years. Vegetarians in the study experienced 12 percent fewer deaths over the period. Dietary choices appeared to play a big role in protecting the participants from heart disease, from which vegetarians were 19 percent less likely to die than the carnivores.

MORE THAN 14,000 PEOPLE

joined together during the summer solstice in late June of 2013 for the world's largest-ever Bikram Yoga class in New York's Time Square. "The solstice is the celebration of the sun. As yogis, we worship the sun," said class leader Rajashree Choudhury, a five-time winner of the All-India Yoga Championship. People spread out all over the square to stretch and breath. Some were even meditating and doing japa beside the busy New York streets.

RESEARCHERS AT THE UNIVERSITY

of Glasgow have found that lower fitness levels in middle-aged men of South Asian origin are contributing to higher blood sugar levels and increased diabetes risk when compared with white men throughout the UK. Those of South Asian ethnicity have three to five times the risk of type 2 diabetes. The research suggests that physical activity guidelines may need to be changed to take ethnicity into account.

THE SRI VENKATESWARA TEMPLE

opened its doors in Detroit this May. The \$10-million-dollar, 25,000-square-foot temple in Novi, just one of several Hindu temples being built in the Detroit area, reflects the success of Asian Indian Americans in Michigan. Ironically, in July, Detroit became the largest American city to declare itself bankrupt.

ON JUNE 24, 2013, THE

California State Senate passed a Resolution, establishing October as California Hindu American Awareness and Appreciation Month. Hindu American Foundation member Vineet Sharma stated, "We are extremely grateful to the State Senate for unanimously passing the resolution, which will go a long way to raising awareness and understanding about the Hindu American community and our beliefs."

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